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The Language of Health-Promoting Schools in Aotearoa New Zealand

It is argued that a clear definition and consistent use of words will develop an understanding of this movement that aims to identify and address school health issues.

The idea of Health-Promoting Schools is relatively new to New Zealand - it dates from 1997, when the funding authority of the time, North Health, set up a pilot initiative in Auckland and Northland. The idea came to New Zealand ready-made, with its own descriptive language based on experiences from other countries where Health-Promoting Schools have been established since the early 1990s.

However, despite the time it has been operating, it is apparent that the language used to describe Health-Promoting Schools is not always consistent and is sometimes downright confusing!

I argue that we should take the opportunity in Aotearoa New Zealand to agree on a clear and consistent set of particular words and phrases relating to the concepts of Health-Promoting Schools. If we can do this and adopt a common language which everyone understands, the benefits will be a readier acceptance of the idea of Health-Promoting Schools and an increased likelihood of growth and sustainability of the movement as more schools adopt this way of thinking and working.

The language of Health-Promoting Schools

We have all been in situations where people use jargon we don't entirely understand, leaving us feeling irritated, confused and excluded. I have been concerned that we in the Health-Promoting Schools movement have all too readily fallen into the trap of irritating and excluding people in this way. It is too easy to use words and phrases in such a

way that the meaning, while obvious to us, is anything but obvious to those hearing about Health-Promoting Schools for the first time. This is of course a very undesirable situation: if people find the messages about Health-Promoting Schools hard to understand, they are much less likely to be convinced and become involved.

The term 'Health-Promoting Schools'

Increasing numbers of people working in education and health promotion will be familiar with the term 'Health-Promoting Schools'. Some of us will use it on a daily basis, and more will have heard it or seen it in writing. But what does it mean? Does it mean the same as 'Healthy Schools'?

I argue that it does not; that a 'Health-Promoting School' is more than simply a healthy school. To understand why the term 'Health-Promoting School' is fundamentally different to 'Healthy School' it is relevant to look at the history of these terms and the ideas they describe.

The term 'Health-Promoting School' came from the World Health Organisation in the late 1980s. It was part of a new approach to public health, a way of working with people in particular community settings to improve health. The idea was that whether the setting was a prison, a city, a hospital or a school, the community in that setting could be encouraged to identify its particular health issues and to then find ways to address them.

Indeed, this is the essence of health

promotion - encouraging a community to identify issues of concern and find ways of making changes for the better to improve their own health, rather than having health professionals tell them what the health issues are and what they should be doing about them.

Thus, in line with this approach, a Health-Promoting School is one that involves the whole school community in identifying issues of concern relating to health and then finds ways of addressing these issues. And importantly, the difference between Health-Promoting Schools and schools that regard themselves as 'Healthy Schools' is that Health-Promoting Schools adopt an ongoing, continuing process to identify issues of concern and then systematically and deliberately deal with them.

It's useful to have a definition and there are many for Health-Promoting Schools, but I particularly like this one from Queensland Health Education:

"A health promoting school is one that works in a way which demonstrates a whole school commitment to improving and protecting the health and well-being of the school community. More specifically, a health promoting school is one that uses a health promoting schools approach. A health promoting school cannot be defined by the presence of special projects, educational activities or specific physical characteristics. Nor is it a program with a beginning or end." (Queensland Health Education, (2001), Toolbox Booklet 1, p.12)

So, having established that the term 'Health-Promoting Schools' has a very specific meaning, I want to look more closely at the term itself.

Health-Promoting Schools What's in a hyphen?

Generally in New Zealand the term Health-Promoting Schools has been used without the hyphen. I argue that this is unclear and ungrammatical. Think back to the occasion when you saw the phrase 'Health Promoting Schools' for the first time. What did it mean to you? How did you read it? Unless you have some prior knowledge the meaning of the three words Health Promoting Schools is really unclear and even ambiguous.

Does 'Promoting' go with 'Health', or does it go with 'Schools'? - i.e. does it mean the health system acting to promote schools? Or schools acting to promote health? Putting in the hyphen makes the meaning clear. 'Health-Promoting' becomes the compound adjective describing these schools - they are Health-Promoting Schools.

I argue that to make the term grammatically correct and, more importantly, to make its meaning clear to everyone, the hyphen is essential. I know that most people don't use the hyphen, but I note that the World Health Organisation does use it. Indeed, I was intrigued to notice recently that in a document published by the Australian Health Promoting Schools Association the hyphen was hardly used, except in the Forward written by Jack T. Jones from the World Health Organisation. My first challenge, therefore, is that we follow the World Health Organisation and keep the hyphen in Health-Promoting Schools! We will not only demonstrate our understanding of the term but will also help others to understand what we mean as well.

HPS

While we're thinking about the clarity of the term 'Health-Promoting Schools', let's also reconsider the use of its acronym 'HPS'. This is widely used throughout New Zealand and internationally. However, while I agree that the term 'Health-Promoting Schools' is a mouthful and it is tempting to abbreviate it to 'HPS', I believe we need to think carefully before we do this. It might be fine to use 'HPS' among colleagues and people who have a good understanding of Health-Promoting Schools, but to most people it is just another cryptic piece of jargon, a code understood only by insiders. So my next challenge is that we consider carefully the contexts in which we use 'HPS', and avoid it if there is any chance that it might not be understood.

A Health-Promoting Schools Approach

Looking back at the definition of Health-Promoting Schools, and the idea of the 'Health-Promoting Schools Approach', we commonly identify three aspects of this approach - but the terminology used for these is inconsistent, and therefore can be unnecessarily confusing. To avoid confusion we need to be consistent and clear in the terms we use. I suggest that the clearest set of terms for the three aspects that together make up the Health-Promoting Schools Approach are: the Health-Promoting Schools Framework, the Health-Promoting Schools Cycle, and the Health-Promoting Schools Way of Working.

The Health-Promoting Schools Framework

The Health-Promoting Schools Framework is a term for the planning structure which schools can use to address health issues from a whole school perspective.

The Health-Promoting Schools Cycle

The 'Health-Promoting Schools Cycle' is the term for the ongoing cycle of activities that a school undertakes as a Health-Promoting School.

Understanding the Health-Promoting Schools Cycle helps to answer the question often asked by schools interested in the concept of Health-Promoting Schools: 'What do we have to do?'

Diagram 1 shows the cycle of activities which a Health-Promoting School will ideally move through as it identifies and addresses its health issues.

The Health-Promoting Schools Way of Working

The Health-Promoting Schools Way of Working refers to the manner in which schools conduct themselves at each point in the Health-Promoting Schools Cycle. For us in Aotearoa New Zealand The Health-Promoting Schools Way of Working is based on the three principles of the Treaty of Waitangi: Partnership, Participation

and Protection. In addition, the Ottawa Charter, the basis of public health promotion, also suggests Advocacy, Enablement and Mediation. For anyone who seeks to facilitate changes that are acceptable and sustainable in the communities they work with, it is worthwhile considering how these six terms can be best applied to the way in which they work. Together they describe the Health-Promoting Schools Way of Working.

Conclusion

Anyone who has tried to explain to a newcomer what Health-Promoting Schools is about or, even more courageously, has ventured into a staffroom to try to market the idea to sceptical school staff, will understand the challenge that this presents. The challenge would be less daunting if the language we use and the message we present could be clearer and more consistent. Wherever we live in Aotearoa New Zealand we should take care that the words and phrases we use to describe the concepts of Health-Promoting Schools are precise, consistent and clearly understandable by everyone.

References

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